



# CHRIS HOLLINS

## COUNTY CLERK

*Recording the Major Events of Your Life and Protecting Your Right to Vote*



Chairwoman Klick, House Committee on Elections

CC: Vice Chair Cortez

Representative Bucy III

Representative Burrows

Representative Cain

Representative Fierro

Representative Israel

Representative Middleton

Representative Swanson

September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2020

### **Harris County Clerk – Request for Written Submissions on Interim Studies**

Chairwoman Klick,

First, please accept my thanks on behalf of the Harris County Clerk's Office on your commitment to election integrity and access for all Texas voters. As my office prepares for a historic November general election, we appreciate the flexibility of state leadership to offer certain accommodations to voters in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the committee's formal request for information of August 7, 2020, my office makes the following written submissions. These submissions are requests for changes in Texas election law aimed at protecting voting rights by making voting safe, simple, and straightforward for all eligible voters. Thank you for taking the time to consider them.

#### **1) Enact the Current 2020 COVID-19 Accommodations into Permanent Law**

Harris County residents will greatly benefit from the additional week of in person early voting they have been allowed in 2020. Those who choose to vote by mail also benefit by being able to return completed mail ballots in person in the lead up to Election Day. We believe continuing these practices through enactment in Texas election law will allow voters the flexibility to vote in a way that best fits their living arrangements and busy schedules. Voters in the July 2020 primary runoff reported increased satisfaction and ease of voting due to the extension of voting options, and we anticipate similar levels of enthusiasm from voters in the November general election.

## **2) Align Deadlines for Ballot by Mail Application Return**

Though voters have appreciated the extension of certain deadlines, we have received reports of confusion over the different deadlines of returning a completed application for a ballot to be voted by mail in-person versus through the mail. We request consideration of extending the in-person application return deadline to match the mail-in deadline to avoid voter confusion, and to provide voters who are uncertain of the United States Postal Service's current ability to timely deliver mail the same opportunities as those voters who return their application by mail.

## **3) Examine Other Questions the SOS Has Received in Regards to Voting During a Disaster**

My office and other election administrators have leaned heavily on the expertise of the Secretary of State's office as we navigate hosting elections in the middle of a global pandemic.

Consideration should be given to the following items either through legislative enactment or the Secretary of State's rulemaking power:

- a. Affirming the value of curbside voting for disabled and elderly voters, and those with other illnesses that make it unsafe for them to enter a public space. Additionally enact drive thru voting provisions in law as a valuable tool to increase the options, safety, and ability of individuals to vote statewide.
- b. An excuse on the Reasonable Impediment Declaration (RID) form for voters who are unable to secure proper identification due to the closure of state and county offices.

In addition to voter access that has been expanded because of the COVID-19 initiative, my office recommends the Election Committee review all flyers, paperwork, signage, or other documents required by law or the Secretary of State in holding an election. Every public entity faces a delicate balance of providing information to our residents while also respecting public funds in printing and organizing those resources. Below are just a few examples of different forms required to be printed and provided to voters that we find are rarely used, or can be offered via our publicly accessible website for greater accessibility and use. The intent is not to reduce any information available to voters, but to creatively move to more technologically advanced forms of communication that are also accessible.

### Example of Documents to Review

- a. Printed binders of information related to bond elections. In Harris County, less than a handful of voters have used the information in the past five elections.
- b. Letters that are included with mail ballots that increase the number of pages that voters must sort through, and the cost of mailing ballots to voters, even though the same information is printed on the ballot and carrier envelopes themselves.

c. The sample ballots posted on the walls of voting locations. Due to the need to list all possible elections within the county, the posted sample ballots are confusing for voters at any given voting location.

As you review these submissions and other charges please consider the Harris County Clerk's office at your disposal for any data or resources that may be useful to you. If safety and time permit, we welcome you all to Harris County to see our election operations at work at our expanded NRG Arena election facility. Do not hesitate to reach out to me directly, or my Chief of Staff, Teneshia Hudspeth (Teneshia.Hudspeth@cco.hctx.net) for any further assistance.

Sincerely,

Chris Hollins

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'CH', with a large loop and a horizontal line extending to the right.

County Clerk, Harris County, Texas